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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN REUNIFICATION
TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL KS KN
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE KOH GUN ON NORTH KOREA,
ALLIANCE AND DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: CDA Bill Stanton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Over lunch with the DCM and PolMinCouns on November 9, former Prime Minister Goh Kun, among the leading candidates in the 2007 presidential election, emphasized that his experience as acting President in 2004 made him realize that national security was the most important consideration for heads of state. Toward this end, the ROK had to sustain a strong alliance with the United States and watch North Korea closely. Beyond national security, Koh said, education reform, job creation and real estate prices would be top election issues. On domestic politics, the former Prime Minister counted himself as among those capable of forming a broad coalition to face off against the strong candidates from the opposition Grand National Party (GNP). End Summary.

Already Possessing Presidential Experience

¶2. (C) Former PM Koh Gun was careful to point out that he already had some experience living in the Blue House. Koh said that in March 2004, quite unexpectedly, he became acting President because the National Assembly had impeached President Roh. Suddenly, in overseas financial markets, Korean bonds were sinking due to higher interest rates. Koh immediately ordered his national security chief, Lee Jong-seok, to send instructions to the ROK military that, above all else, national security could not be compromised. Thereafter, he instructed Foreign Minister Ban to call foreign ministers of the United States, Japan, China and Russia to assure them that the ROKG would continue normal operations and relations. It was only after FM Ban spoke to Secretary Powell, which resulted in the issuance of a

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strongly supportive statement from the Department, that financial markets calmed down.

¶3. (C) Koh also recalled the sleepless night in April 2004, when the North Korean train in Ryongchon blew up, killing several hundred people. Because of the lack of information, some people thought that was an assassination attempt on Kim Jong-il, who was traveling in the region. Koh stayed up all night agonizing over how to deal with various scenarios involving KJI's death.

U.S.-ROK Alliance

¶4. (C) Those experiences, Koh said, taught him the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance. The two allies had to be able to deal with North Korea. Thorough planning by the allies was essential to deal with scenarios such as KJI's death or the sudden collapse of the DPRK regime. Koh said that he had concerns over the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) because of its implications for war plans.

Currently, OPLAN 5027 which would come into effect in the event of a war, called for some 670,000 U.S. troops to be deployed in Korea. After the OPCON transfer, however, there would be a new war plan and no Combined Forces Command, which would mean that Korea could not count on as many U.S. troops.

Koh asked whether the next ROK government could renegotiate OPCON transfer.

¶5. (C) The DCM said that it was unfortunate that OPCON had become such a divisive domestic political issue, because it was a technical issue, involving ROK military capabilities, above all else. Washington and Seoul had discussed and agreed on OPCON transfer based on such technical capabilities. The DCM assured the former prime minister that the transfer would take place based on the premise of not exposing the ROK to security risks. Moreover, the transfer had no relation to the U.S. security commitments on the Peninsula. Those remained as strong as ever, the DCM underlined.

North Korea and 6PT

¶6. (C) Koh welcomed the tripartite agreement in Beijing the previous week to resume the Six Party Talks (6PT). Koh hoped that there would be results, but warned not to be too optimistic, especially in the short run. Recalling his own experience in negotiating the 1992 North-South agreement on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Koh said that this

was an old problem -- Pyongyang would not easily give up its nuclear weapons and programs. The only condition under which Pyongyang would contemplate denuclearization was if the U.S. provided credible assurance of non-aggression toward the regime. That was a very difficult condition to meet because DPRK leaders were essentially paranoid. Still, he believed it was worth a try.

¶7. (C) Responding to Koh's query on Banco Delta Asia, the DCM clarified that the USG was prepared to discuss the issue -- and had agreed to form a working group to do so -- but a genuine resolution depended on the North Koreans themselves, because their illicit activities, including counterfeiting of U.S. currency, must stop.

Domestic Politics

¶8. (C) The basic failing of President Roh was his inability to bring the South Korean people together, Koh said. Roh was a divisive politician. In Roh's thinking either one was pro-American or anti-American; pro-or-anti North Korea; the same with globalization. That was not the way to govern. Rather, a president had to bring people together. For example, Koh continued, when people asked him how he viewed the United States, his position was that the ROK should leverage American political and economic might. The U.S. had no territorial ambitions on the Peninsula. There was no reason why South Korea should not use its relations with the U.S. to promote its self-interest. This was why he strongly supported an FTA with the U.S.

¶9. (C) Koh said that he would soon form a political party with like-minded people to put up a viable candidate in the 2007 presidential race. These were the so-called silent majority, the middle ground thinkers without strong ideology.

He expected education reform, real estate prices, unemployment and national security to be the most important election issues.

Comment

¶10. (C) "Decent, competent, and balanced" are the most common descriptions of Koh Gun. Also widely used are "dull" and "grey." A career diplomat with an uncanny ability to build consensus, Koh Gun has held all the key positions in the South Korean government, even the top one. In fact, Koh is fondly remembered for his tenure as acting President in 2004, when his non-confrontational manner smoothed the way for a quiet few months in the wake of the divisive political confrontation on Roh's impeachment.

¶11. (C) Now almost seventy, Koh finds himself the most popular political figure outside the opposition GNP, inspiring his ambition to pursue another opportunity to enter the Blue House, but through the front door this time. Whether this materializes or not depends on the various parties and factions, including the ruling Uri Party, the Jeolla-based Democratic Party, and the power-brokers of the central Choongchung region, coming together behind him. A tough task by any measure.

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